THE VIRTUAL OTHER:
NEGOTIATING PERSONHOOD IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract:

In this thesis, I draw on anthropological and sociological theories of personhood and selves and platform capitalism to investigate the emergent case of CGI (computer generated imagery) Instagrammers. As the digital age foster a construction of new meaning about concomitant shifts in behavior, consumption, communication, and representation, this thesis contributes to the growing body of anthropological and sociological literature on the impacts of technology over our perception of the relationship between the individual and society. Based on a case study of CGI Instagrammers and their followers, I argue that the personhood is contingent upon the participation of others. By utilizing participant observation and semi-structured interviews in an online setting, I take CGI Instagrammers as "generalized others" (Mead) and discuss how self and the other are negotiated. Explicating how neoliberalism, as a specific mode of rationality, pervades the digital through extraction of personal data, surveillance, and incentivization of self-investment (Brown 2015), I argue that the digital space, as much as it opens a room for our negotiation of personhood, is still highly mediated by the mechanisms of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017).

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

The world is rapidly becoming ever more digitalized and the future is undoubtedly imagined within the realm of the digital, where information technology applications and appliances are an inseparable part of our lives. This has considerable impact on the ability of scholars to construct new meanings about concomitant shifts in behavior, consumption, communication, and representation. Despite the growing body of sociological and anthropological literature that translates frameworks for understanding social dynamics from analogue into digital, there is still much to be learned about how the current technological moment impacts our understanding of the relationship between the individual and society.

Internet reached almost all corners of the world, amassing over four billion of users among which more than three billons are active social media users[1]. Social media, or social networking sites (henceforth "SNS") are online platforms which enable its users to connect and communicate regardless of the time and place. These platforms predominantly focus on self-publishing, user-generated content, where their users can interactively share textual, sound or visual material in private or public groups. By far, most popular among SNS is Facebook with over two billion active users[2], and Facebook owned platform – Instagram is fastest growing SNS[3].

With respect to certain generations, principally to those who have come of age in the digital era, self-representation and interaction online – primarily on SNS is one of the main means by which they communicate and represent themselves to others around them and to the

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[1]https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/ last accessed on 6.07.2019

[2] https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/ last accessed on 30.05.2019

[3] https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/ last accessed on 6.07.2019

world**.** As such, in order to explain how personhood is negotiated in regard new digital environments, it is important to understand how it manifests at this moment in time.

Due to developments of computer-generated imagery (henceforth "CGI"), designers can make realistic human-appearing animations. Individuals or groups of people can set SNS account for these avatars, ascribe them story, and use them to impersonate behavior of human users on SNS. Thus, it becomes harder, if not impossible, to distinguish real sentient people behind SNS from those created by CGI. This phenomenon is especially on the rise on Instagram where these CGI avatars are gaining celebrity-like statuses. Their accounts gather audience of Instagram users which are counted thousands, and sometimes reaching number greater than million. Their novelty lies in factors such as the combination of the most recent marketing trends, high tech features, global reach and elaborate narratives. However, after more attentive observation of their photos, it is usually clear that they do not depict real humans. And many of these account state that they are not human being. Despite this, most of their followers (Instagram users – Instagrammers, who follow their accounts on Instagram) address them as if they are real human beings, admire them or express content to them.

The fact that some of these what I call CGI Instagramers has had such a great reception by the public demonstrates how, in less than a decade of misusage of social media, our perception of what is real has abruptly been distorted. In times of post-truth and fake news, the question of what or who is real and if it matters, is overwhelming and omnipresent, and it only comes naturally for many followers of CGI Instagrammers to doubt.

I find this most emergent trend of CGI Instagrammers and the way how their followers relate to them as fitting case study for understanding the way personhood is negotiated in digital age.

In order to realize this task, I investigated the relationship between the CGI Instagrammers and their followers in ethnographical research. By using empirical examples from conversations held with Instagram users who are invested with CGI Instagramers, and observation of the field, I discuss the specific analytical challenges relevant for anthropological understanding of personhood in the digital age. Further, I broaden the discourse with the analysis of the most recent and pertinent developments of capitalism and explicate what effect it has on the relationship between the individual and society.

My thesis is structured in a following way: First, I present the background and the ethnographic embedding of my case study. I describe popular influencer known as Lil Miquela and introduce the concept of CGI Instagrammers, then, I provide detailed case study about the relationship between CGI Instagrammers and their followers. After this, I discuss methods I used in order to gather necessary data for my analysis. In the first part of the Chapter 2, I explore whether traditional anthropological and sociological understandings of "person," "self" and "other", imbued with literature on digital anthropology and sociology can be productively applied to comprehend today's digital ecosystem. Then, in the second part of the chapter I present material gathered during my ethnography and situate it in the previously discussed literature in order to understand relationship between CGI Instagrammers such as Miquela and their followers. In Chapter 3, I concentrate on the specific economic system which fostered the formation of phenomena CGI Influencers as "virtual other". I discuss how neoliberalism as a specific mode of rationality pervades the digital through extraction of personal data, surveillance, and incentivization of self-investing entrepreneurs. Finally, conclusion offers different ways to bridge the gap between the micro and macro levels of analysis on the constitution of personhood.

8

Chapter One - Background and Ethnographic Embedding of the Case Study of CGI Instagrammers and their Audience

1.1 Introduction

In the following chapter I present the background and the ethnographic embedding of my case study of CGI Instagrammers. In order to understand and illustrate how personhood is negotiated in the digital age, I provide a case study about the relationship between CGI Instagrammers and their followers. In the first section of chapter, I develop a technical description of the popular platform Instagram, explain it functions and briefly mention its demographic setting and economic aspects. After introducing the notion of influencers and their role in social media, I shift my attention to a popular influencer known as Lil Miquela and introduce the concept of CGI Instagrammers *i.e.,* virtual models and virtual influencers. I present the emergence and expansion of this most recent phenomenon, and its implications and effect on audiences (followers) through the set of the empirical examples, which I observed a yearlong period.

1.2 SNS Instagram: Let's talk figures

Social networking sites (henceforth SNS) are online platforms which enable its users to connect and communicate regardless of the time and place. SNS predominantly focus on self-publishing, user-generated content, hence, they allow sharing of information, sound and visual material among its users in private or public groups. The most popular SNS is Facebook which at the moment has 2.320 billion monthly active users worldwide and 55.8 billion USD in revenue[4]. In sixth place is the Facebook Inc-owned platform Instagram, with more than *1 billion monthly active users*, and about *500 million daily active users*[5]. Among those users, more than two thirds are aged 34 and younger (32% of them are between 25-34,

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[4] https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/ last accessed on 30.05.2019

[5] https://www.statista.com/topics/1882/instagram/ last accessed on 30.05.2019

and 31% of them are between 18-24)[6], and around 30% of Facebook ad revenue comes from Instagram[7]. Overall, usage is spread almost equally among genders (52% female, 48% male), in the age group between 25-34 the ratio is 50:50, while for younger age groups between 18-24 usage stands at 44%, 56% male as opposed to 44% female[8].

SNS Instagram was launched in 2010 as a photo-sharing platform which endorses the use of filters and fillers for the users to seemingly enhance, edit and manipulate visual material through which they communicate. Instagram was designed primarily as a smartphone app, but later development enabled access through personal computers and tablets. However, these platforms' services are continuously being developed and today Instagram offers its users the ability to upload videos, "Instagram stories"[9], to message, "like", share, or comment on posts shared publicly or with pre-approved groups of users, otherwise known as "followers". They can also organize and browse content with the help of tags and locations[10].

Due to its visual features and its user population age, Instagram is becoming more and more of a marketing platform, especially for fashion, sports and luxury brands, celebrity endorsements and the like, amassing thousands, and sometimes millions, of followers[11]. In 2014, Instagram enabled paid advertising content and it has since gained more than 2 million monthly advertisers by 2017[12]. The idea of influencers[13] – users with a large audience, which can range from few thousands to millions of followers, "who can persuade others by virtue of

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[6] https://www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/ last accessed on 30.05.2019

[7] https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/instagram-stats last accessed on 30.05.2019

[8] https://www.statista.com/statistics/325587/instagram-global-age-group/ last accessed on 30.05.2019

[9] Instagram story: collection of photos and videos that will disappear after 24 hours.

[10] https://instagram-press.com/our-story/ last accessed on 10.11.2018

[11] https://web.archive.org/web/20171005083659/https://socialblade.com/instagram/top/100/followers last accessed on 10.12.2018

[12] https://business.instagram.com/blog/welcoming-two-million-advertisers/ last accessed on 29.05.2019

[13] Concept "Influencer" dates to back to work of sociologist P. F. Lazarsfeld "The People's Choice" (1944) and it meant "opinion leader" who used her/his "personal influence" to effect opinion of the masses before the elections.

their trustworthiness and authenticity"[14] – is a fast-growing phenomenon, and now almost synonymous with the Instagram. Unlike the endorsement of brands and products by celebrities like the Kardashians, most influencers on Instagram are seemingly "ordinary" individuals, appearing as peers to their audiences. They promote different lifestyles and endorse products and brands[15]. According to 92% of marketers who collaborate with influencers, they find it an effective way to boost the brand's success[16]. Indeed, by the 2017, 16% of worldwide internet users under the age of thirty-four found a brand or product through such endorsement[17]. According to most recent calculations, "[t]he market size for influencers on Instagram globally is growing at 50% annually and projected to hit $2.38 billion by 2019"[18]. There is an industry on the rise which functions as a broker between those private individuals with many followers, and brands who want to reach their audience in less assertive way. In this regard, broker agency *Instabrand* presets this phenomenon as "the trusted voice" of the individual buyer which reproduces the well-known "word-of-mouth" marketing tool[19]. When one "googles" the word Instagram, most of the sites offered have titles like: "How to Use Instagram to Promote Your Brand and Drive Sales".

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[14] http://mediakix.com/2017/07/instagram-influencer-definition-examples/#gs.d25pmAc last accessed on 10.12.2018

[15] "People tend to trust recommendations from people more than they trust brands or advertising or commercials" Olivier Toubia (Columbia Business School) https://money.cnn.com/video/technology/2018/06/25/cgi-instagram-influencer-miquela-brud-shudu-brands-advertising-orig.cnnmoney/index.html last accesed 14.12.2018

[16] http://mediakix.com/2019/02/cgi-influencers-instagram-models/#gs.a3awd4 last accessed on 29.05.2019

[17] https://www.statista.com/statistics/407838/celebrity-endorsement-brand-discovery-online-age/ last accessed on 29.05.2019

[18] https://adespresso.com/blog/cgi-instagram-influencers/ last accesed 14.12.2018

[19] https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-sidebar-advertising-disrupted-20150117-story.html last accessed on 29.05.2019

1.3 The Uncanny Cases of CGI Instagrammers

Figure 1 Lil Miquela

The photo above is of the famous Instagrammer and influencer Miquela Sousa also known as Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela)[20]. "Her" Instagram profile was activated in April 2016 and as of today, has amassed a dazzling 1.6 million followers. Miquela is "based" in LA and presented as a trendy girl, posing in cool outfits such as Prada, Chanel, Calvin Klein, Supreme, Nike, to name just a few. Miquela supports social causes such as Black Lives Matter, Black Girls Code, Innocence Project, LGBT Life Center and Justice for Youth. Moreover, she has released 5 singles (*e.g.* "Not Mine" and "Right Back"[21]) which went viral on the other SNS such as Spotify, Vimeo and YouTube. The photos on "her" Instagram account depict "her" doing daily chores like eating, picking outfit for the day, and having a fancy coffee after work; "she" is also depicted traveling, dancing, taking "selfies" with celebrities, DJ's, models,

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[20] For the clarity of text all references to website of CGI Instagrammers can be found in the Table 1 - *List of CGI Instagrammers with details*

[21] https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWeHb_SrtJbrT8VD-_QQpRA/videos last accessed on 31.5.2019

producers and popular influencers. Miquela is also a columnist and an editor of Dazed Beauty[22] magazine, and "she" conducts video interviews as well as reports on festivals. Time magazine proclaimed "her" as one of "The 25 Most Influential People on the Internet"[23].

Miquela does what other influencers do, and she does it efficaciously. When one scrolls over Miquela's Instagram account, without paying full attention to the detail of Miquela might pass as just another influencer among many. But the thing is, she is not. Lil Miquela is a visual representation, "she" is not run by artificial intelligence and does not have any physical presence. She is a pioneer of the most recent trend on Instagram, the phenomenon of virtually created avatars mimicking human influencers. Namely, technological developments in CGI design of the 21st century allow people behind the animated avatar (individuals, groups of individuals, or companies) to make them appear realistic on photos and videos and ascribe them other humanly features through textual and sound narratives.

This is fascinating or bizarre, but hardly surprising for such a platform like Instagram. Handpicked photos and videos aimed for Instagram profiles, through the use of a combination of Photoshop skills, fillers and numerous takes on the "Instagram-filter" aesthetic ideal, not only does all content appear the same, or extremely similar, but it also appears unrealistic, which makes us wonder if we are actually able to recognize computer generated images; especially when it comes to these carefully curated images of online personas. In colloquial parlance, real people appear fake and fake "people" appear real. So, it comes naturally that it is hard to distinguish between the real sentient people behind SNS from those created by CGI.

Miquela is the first, and by far, the most famous CGI avatar on Instagram, but "she" is not the only one there. At the very beginning of my research (March 2018), I was able to pinpoint three more CGI Instagrammers, among which were Ronald Blawko (@blawko22), a rough-

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[22] "Dazed Beauty" is a branch of a more famous "Dazed and Confused" magazine from 1990's.
[23] http://time.com/5324130/most-influential-internet/ last accessed on 10.12.2018

cut and fashionable male Miquela counterpart, and Miquela's nemesis and former Trump supporter and "robot" supremacist Bermuda (@bermudaisbae). Both have similar number of followers: 135k and 136k respectively; and, as I learned a month later, both are creations of the same clandestine "transmedia studio", *Brud*, which launched Miquela's profile at the first place.

Another highly notable CGI avatar, that I have located in the beginning of my research, on Instagram is Shudu (@shudu.gram) in her Instagram profile "BIO"[24] crowned as a "The World's First Digital Supermodel". Shudu is a creation of British fashion photographer Cameron J. Wilson. Wilson's exceptional skills in 3D modeling and his attention to details made Shudu appear to be realistic, even after closer inspection of her photos (see Figure 2). Shudu's popularity erupted after Rihanna[25]'s Instagram re-post of "her" photo where "she" is "wearing" a makeup and brand "Fenty Beauty" is tagged, reaching 175k Instagram followers. A year after, Wilson sprouted a whole army of digital models "The Digitals" (henceforth Digitals) for the French luxury fashion house "Balmain". Currently, there are seven of them: Shudu, Brenn, Galaxia, Koffi, Dagny[26], and Margot and Zhi ("whose" Instagram pages are in the making).

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[24] "BIO" (derivative of biography), is short description under the name of Instagram profiles.
[25] Rihanna is one of most famous pop singers of US (and world-wide) today, she is also founder of the "Fenty Beauty Cosmetics".
[26] Their Instagram accounts: @brenn.gram, @glaxia.gram, @koffi.gram, @dagny.gram respectively

1.3.1 Miquela's "coming out" and the rise of the CGI Instagrammers

In April 2018, both Brud avatars and the Digitals with Miquela and Shudu as forerunners started taking the spotlight of many pages and covers of online and print magazines. Interestingly enough, they were not just visible in tabloids and fashion magazines, but also in respected media houses with significant reach. Here are a few examples of those with titles:

Figure 2 Shudu (left) The World's First Digital Supermodel, and Ajur (right) - "real" human model (@ajurofficial)

BBC "The fascinating world of Instagram's 'virtual' celebrities", CNN Business "Instagram star isn't what she seems. But brands are buying in", Guardian "What if your favourite Instagrammer isn't real?", The New York Times "The Rise of the Social Media Fembot", to name just a few. Whether due to their content, or right combinations of hashtags and endorsements

from other celebrities, or through their innovativeness and mysterious identity which sparked a debate among their followers on Instagram and other SNS. Most importantly, the debate whet followers' curiosity on the matters such as if they are real biological humans or if they are real humans with lots of photoshop-ing and editing. Are they robots, or animation/CGI, and does it even matter?

It did not take long for Wilson to exempt himself from the debate, and to publicly state on his and Shudu's Instagram profile that Shudu (as well as the rest of the Digitals who

were to come) is a work of art, a pure 3D creation, representing Cameron's vision of the female beauty, and that he never wanted to deceive anybody, hence labeling "her" profile as "The World's First *Digital* Supermodel" [emphasis added] at the first place. On the other hand, the Brud did not let it go so easily: they scripted a whole soap opera-like drama on Instagram about Miquela "coming-out" in front of her SNS and saying that she is not a biological human, after two years of her online presence. Namely, Brud presented a narrative where Bermuda "hacked" Miquela's profile and threatened Miquela ("in front" of Miquela's followers) to tell "the truth". The whole drama resolved in reconciliation between two CGI Instagrammers, where Miquela found out "herself" that "she" is a "robot", a first in a line of many conscious AI entities, and that she is not a human-being like "her" "friends" and followers. This was followed by "her" "existential" "crisis" which she could never overcome without the support of her faithful fans and followers. Maybe like most drama surrounding Hollywood, this was all orchestrated in order to attract more media attention, and more followers, and surprisingly, it all worked out for Brud. Namely, in the following months, and to this very day, I observed an active rise in Miquela's (as well as of Blawko and Bermuda) popularity on Instagram and other SNS. After the drama, the amount of comments, likes, shares, videos and conspiracy theories peaked. One single post from that period (19th of April 2018) depicting Miquela's "coming out" and "her" existential crisis" has almost fifty thousand comments and two hundred thirty thousand likes. To illustrate the atmosphere, here I display a certain section of those comments and reactions that sum up my observations. I present comments in their original form, except that I group them thematically so they can be read in a more comprehensible way:

1. **desiree.bernache** someone explain to me pls
   millie_8558 I understand but I don't understand are you an actual person who has just been made to look like a robot or are you a actually a robot and not a human being???
   ethans_eyelash_ Man this is crazy now I can't stop thinking if I am a robot like me

sylnnt.rkun Wait so she is an actual robot that can walk around and talk and feel emotion i didnt know that type of technology

modasookah @shanedawson conspiracy theories

celena_meighan I feel like I just watched an episode of Black Mirror...😵

2. **awkwardly_annoying** BIGGEST PLOT TWIST OF THE CENTURY.

   _singingintherayn @jadeloguercio WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK WTFFF

   addie_june wait what this is wild

   annabelle.castor SHOOK

   sabrinasakhai DINAH WTF @dinahsedaghatpour

   dinahsedaghatpour @sabrinasakhai SABRINA WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING

3. **one.shawty** @lilmiquela you may be a robot but you're a beautiful and awesome robot, you're better than humans, I may be a human myself, but you're better and smarter than us and that is just so impressive and it would be really cool if you just kept living your life and keep your head up high and don't let words affect you 🤍 🤍.

   asia_not_the_continent I'm actually crying!!!!? I feel so so [x3] bad for you!!! U dont know what im feeling now

   asia_not_the_continent 😭😭😭😭😱😭😭😭😱😭😭😭😭 […x5]

   jacobhensonn I am here for you. I too understand how it feels to be "not valid". You've got a friend in me and I appreciate you so much. Your art, your light, everything. Whether you're a robot or not, you still feel emotions like me. So, does it really matter? You may as well be valid. Just know you have people on your side. We love you to the stars and back. 💗

   maya_not_maia_ Dear Miquela, when you find out that your "family" [Brud] has lied to you your whole life, it sucks but that doesn't change the way I see you. In my mind you are the absolute bravest person I have ever met, and you will always be human to me. 🤍

   de.ss.tt You're beautiful and have more love and passion than some, maybe most people can say truly about themselves 🤍 I send you love cause you deserve the universe!

   ibeliveinlove8 Cognitive behavioral therapies helped me a lot when I was dealing with feelings leftover from my nuclear and peer families.

17

4. **natashaboou** why is a robot trying to make me pity her

   tiitanicsinclaiir_ This is the most fakest shit in the world, are you guys dumb?

   jasminaa26 wtf should we care of any of this

   heyitsmik what is wrong with you people?

   kian.rh.j So wtf??? You think we people must care and think about all this bullshit??? Just fuck of and live your life. A robot/AI/a photoshoped group, so what?

5. **ig.lydiagrace** @sunandmoon1_ you thought this was a person?

   ig.lydiagrace Surely you know somethings up when people comment you're a robot on every post you have and she looks nothing like people. If she is a "human robot" sorry to hurt your "feelings" but you must have noticed something was up…

   sunandmoon1_ @ig.lydiagrace i don't know what to think. Is this a robot? it would be really of her if she would do a video or something like that

   ellenwedgeofficial i know this is late but i also saw this the day it was posted. but did anyone not know this already? sooooo obvious.

   lmfaowutever @blackgirlvee she a robot

   blackgirlvee @lmfaowutever i doubt it

6. **kenn.christine** She is human, this is all for attention. We love you as an influencer, but she wants to keep up the illusion for which I applaud

   affiliatemarketingsamurai This is legendary scripting right here. Just beautiful.

   ayeitzalec I'm sorry, but this just doesn't make any sense. Technology isn't advanced enough (that we have seen) to make such a realistic robot like this. The story doesn't make much sense either and I can't really believe that this is the truth. Before this happened, I truly believed that lilmiuqela was only for art purposes, but this just messed everything up. In my opinion, she is not a robot, and this is true, my only question is, why the hell is she making a story and like this?

   kalekitten this has gone too far…*we're enabling it!!!* [emphasis added]

Although Miquela's followers and audience speculated on her humanness since the beginning of "her" Instagram "carrier", Brud's strategic revelation triggered an avalanche of reactions and debates among the audience. As can be seen from the range of displayed

comments, it produced an outburst of confusion about what Miquela represents (points 1. and 2.), and then, confusion of those people who are confused about it (5. point), also show empathy, support and identification of themselves with Miquela's "troubles" (3. point), and on the other hand outbursts of anger and annoyance towards Miquela and other followers who still who treat her as a human person (4. point), then, there are those who approach it more astute and try to rationalize and explain to other followers the situation or admire the marketing trick creators of Miquela pulled out (6. point). Anyhow, Miquela's fan base persevered, as I witnessed through my year-long observation of followers' comments, and as mentioned before, the number of her followers did not decline but got higher instead. Some stayed because of curiosity, others because they were already too invested in a narrative to let it go, while some project their ideas about robots, cyborgs or development of artificial intelligence through Miquela, others mock "her", but most are there to give "her" support, ask for advice, look up to and get inspired by "her".

Generally, till this very day, most of Miquela's audience addresses "her" in a manner as if "she" is one among many real-life Instagram influencers. They stay in touch with "her", and they provide mutual feedback to each other. After locating the original four CGI Instagrammers in April 2018, I recognized the potential in this phenomenon. By the end of April 2019, I managed to discover forty-four CGI Instagrammers with varying functions, graphic quality, popularity and influence. Most of them are "virtual influencers and models" like Brud Instagrammers (for example imma.gram, liam_nikuro, perl.www), some are "just" models, similar to Digitals (for example hey_mr.stone, avadiva.gram, eda.dama), others depict "erotic" content (for example baddiecandie, thereal.veronica, i.am.lena, milamilo.gram), there are "positive" influencers for high-schoolers (for example cadeharper, pippapei), and those who advocate digitalized/AI future on SNS. Even KFC[27] created its own

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[27] American fast food chain

19

CGI Influencer – "Colonel H. Sanders" to promote their products. For the full list of CGI Instagrammers with details and links to Instagram profiles see the "Table 1" in the appendix. This trend is most popular in the US (Brud), UK (The Digitals) and Japan (Imma, Liam, Aoi)[28].

During the last months of my ethnographic observation, I noticed that the audience of the CGI Instagrammers became slightly more used to the idea of CGI Instagrammers, although a confusion and amazement among them never ceased to exist. All of the CGI Instagram profiles which I located, and which were created[29], after the Miquela "scandal", "behave" like real-life influencers/models, but state in their bio, or in their captions, that they are "virtual" or "digital". Vast majority of them use hashtags like virtual influencer, CGI, 3D, and robot, which should indicate that they are not biological humans, but still, their followers refer to them and address them as if they are real persons. One exception is the case of CGI Instagrammer - Nea (@dearnea). It is clearly stated that behind her profile is a designer from Cologne who uses this Instagram avatar for sharing her creative works. And most of the followers of Nea compliment the designer's skills in comments, such as in following example:

serena_landey@dearnea Which programs did you use for this picture?

Dearnea@serena_landey Hi Serena. I am using c4d

serena_landey@dearnea you're doing an amazing work!

What is also notable is that lately, collaborations between CGI Influencers from different creators from different countries are becoming popular. For example, Blawko and Imma are parallelly endorsing a new Burberry[30] collection under the tag "#burberrygeneration" and Imma, and Dagny (Digitals), were presented with Colonel Sanders in his KFC campaign.

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[28] or imma.gram, liam_nikuro, aoiprism respectively
[29] Majority of them were created in the second part of 2018 and beginning of 2019; See Table 1 for more info.
[30] Burberry is a British luxury fashion house

Although, it is not stated in the BIO of CGI Instagrammer, nor it is visible in the discussion between users, but one of the main purposes of creating these CGI Instagrammers is making money by endorsing brands and products to their followers. For example, more than 6 million dollars was invested last in Brud alone (creators of Miquela, Bermuda, and Blawko) [31]. Today, Brud is valued at more than 125 million dollars due to latest investments[32]. Some, like, Peter Rojas from the *Betaworks Ventures[33]*, believe that by 2020, there are going to be a lot more of CGI Instagrammers, and that in the near future, there will probably be large studios developing such content[34].

From the economic point of view, plenty of texts around the CGI Instagrammer suggest that they have several more advantages when compared to real influencers. CGI Instagrammers are easy to get to the "set", and unlike real human individuals, they are fully customizable. Also, "they" are much more efficient: they do not have to wear actual outfits, to travel to the geographical location, or to be with actual people, or to possess any product they endorse. Consequently, CGI Instagrammers are economically better-off than a real human Important to mention is that in 2017 the Federal Trade Commission added amendments to its "endorsement guides" to oblige influencers to reveal their advertising associations and categorize sponsored posts by hashtags #sponsored and/or #ad[35]. These regulations do not state how would they apply on CGI influencers. Even if these regulations get modified, it is hard to locate who stands behind the CGI. According to Adam Rivietz (cofounder and CSO of

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[31] https://techcrunch.com/2018/04/23/the-makers-of-the-virtual-influencer-lil-miquela-snag-real-money-from-silicon-valley/?amp;guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_cs=LPQ-TBqCSr5oth-Gc2brEg&guccounter=2&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZGF6ZWRkaWdpdGFsLmNvbS9mYXNoaW9uL2FydGljbGUvNDQ1MTYvMS9iZWxsYS1oYWRpZC1saWwtbWlxdWVsYS1sZXNiaWFuLWtpc3MtY2FsdmluLWtsZWluLWl5LXRydXRoLWNhbXBhaWduLW9waW5pb24&guce_referrer_cs=89-z8kAjeKEpT4f8Kd8pOw last accessed on 31.05.2019
[32] https://techcrunch.com/2019/01/14/more-investors-are-betting-on-virtual-influencers-like-lil-miquela/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_cs=SZ33O7Y-VQXnpC6UGzHJ1w last accessed on 31.05.2019
[33] An investment business firm in from US.
[34] *Ibid.* ref. 26
[35] https://www.wired.com/story/lil-miquela-digital-humans/ las accessed on 13.12.2018

the influencer marketing company "#paid")[36] as well as Olivier Toubia (Columbia Business School)[37] actual human influencers can possibly start promoting their CGI alter egos to circumvent rules and regulations.

1.4 Methodology

In order to gain a better understanding of the negotiation of the personhood in the digital age regarding one of the most recent online phenomena, such as the CGI Instagrammers, I decided to employ a qualitative methodology. Mainly, I find this method the most suitable approach for unveiling practices of everyday interaction between CGI instagrammers and its audience. Thus, the applied method has been conducted through long-term ethnographic fieldwork coupled with additional qualitative techniques such as observation, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. However, it is important to underline that due to the digital setting of my case, it is difficult to exercise ethnography in a traditional way, *i.e*., to be physically immersed in an outside place deemed as "the field", as well as doing participant observation. Therefore, I had to adapt my methodological approach to the site of my research, which is the SNS Instagram.

To be more precise, my research methods fall under the category of what Kozinets (2016) terms as "netnography". This is a type of ethnographic approach used for studying interactions online, principally through computer-mediated communication. One caveat for doing this way of ethnography, is what Tom Boellstorff point out when carrying out interviews, as in this setting, the research subjects become isolated from their everyday life (Boellstorff *et al* 2012:65). This has led to many other anthropologists into a false assumption of ethnographic adequacy. To surpass such limitation, I have conducted a year-long (n)ethnographic research, in which I have conducted participant observation on Instagram,

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[36] https://www.wired.com/story/lil-miquela-digital-humans/ last accessed on 13.12.2018

[37] https://money.cnn.com/video/technology/2018/06/25/cgi-instagram-influencer-miquela-brud-shudu-brands-advertising-orig.cnnmoney/index.html last accessed on 13.12.2018

along with eighteen semi-structured interviews with the followers of CGI Instagrammers, as well as two semi-structured interviews with experts on machine learning and 3D design. The triangulation between participant observation, interviews to followers, and interviews to experts will allow a grounded eliciting of meanings relevant for my research question.

Due to the nature of my involvement in the field, I was able to explore freely most of the relevant interactions that CGI Instagrammers and their followers had. This invisible, omniscient-like observation (very well known in classic anthropological scholarship) through my personal Instagram profile allowed me to identify an inventory of practices such as posts of CGI Instagrammers in the shape of stories, photos, short videos with captions, shared content, and tagged photos and videos. I could also gain access to preliminary data of my research subjects (CGI Instagram followers) such as list of followers and whom they follow, description of themselves, and number of interactions through likes and shares of their posts. Hence, I was able to observe the way in which the construction of the relationship between CGI Instagrammer's followers and CGI Instagrammers is developed.

I started my research in March 2018, installing the Instagram application on my laptop and tablet, as well as creating an Instagram account and profile. Because of the novelty of Instagram to myself, I was able to position my observation from an etic perspective, differentiating clearly on how to engage with what CGI Instagrammers did through their profiles, and how CGI Instagram users engage with them. First, I observed in depth the Instagram profiles of the first and most prominent four CGI Instagrammers in the SNS (Miquela, Shudu, Blawko and Bermuda), primarily concentrating on the comments, discussion and reactions of their audience. During the summer 2018, I pinpointed six more of such profiles, and, by the end of 2018, the number of CGI Instagrammers I located was twenty-two. Until the end of my research (20.05.2019) I found a total of forty-four CGI Instagrammers. Through a more detailed observation I realized that six of them (see Table 1)

were not useful for my research due to their extremely low quality, insignificant number of followers, and most important, because they were not reenacting the role and the social life of a human in Instagram[38]. Additionally, linguistic limitations also constrained the selection of relevant CGI Instagram profiles. Such was the case with popular CGI's in Japan[39][40].

Although I was observing posts and comment sections of all the 42 CGI Instagrammer on a daily basis, my main site of research focused on three CGI profiles: Miquela, Blawko, Bermuda, Shudu. These were my main site of research due to the vast number of followers (range from 1,6 million to 135 thousand), adherence to the narrative[41], responsiveness to comments and frequency of posting (few posts per week), as well as "their" presence in printed and online media. Of great relevance for the selection was the intensity of interaction, observed through responsiveness between them and their fanbase. Despite doing most of my observation on Instagram, it was not limited to this specific SNS platform. Additionally, in order to gain further validation of the data gathered I occasionally observed their respective Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. In this sense, I have conducted multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1998), or, to be more precise, multi-sited netnography.

From the beginning, it became obvious to me that Instagram is the primary platform for CGI profiles due to its massive following. For instance, Shudu's profile has 1,6 thousand followers on Facebook, in comparison to her 176 thousand followers on Instagram. Twitter and Facebook are employed for garnering attention and advertise audiences to Instagram, while YouTube, is used to present music videos (Miquela) and vlogs[42] (Blawko). Their

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[38] Here is an example of how the selection process was done: In the case of rubygloom, I found her ineligible because, after swiping through her 6,974 posts, I realized that she is human influencer and designer, who, by the second half of 2018 started to completely photoshop her photos, bringing them to look like CGI, although they originally were not.

[39] (Imma, Liam, Aoi or imma.gram, liam_nikuro, aoipris)

[40] Unfortunately, Instagram did not provide automatic translation for the texts, and doing so through other translating tools would leave aside major semantic information to use for research.

[41] Except the the case of Shudu. Shudu erand appraisal based on her highly detailed photos, while Brud Instagramers concentrated on the narative and character developmment.

[42] Vlog – video blog, usualy on SNS YouTube.

conduct is site-appropriate: on Facebook they share videos, photos and texts; on Twitter, they share photos with short text, or just short text; while on YouTube they post only videos. However, their accounts on these different SNS refer to links to their other platforms, primarily Instagram. The behavior of the audience slightly differs from platform to platform: on YouTube, they discuss music, while on Facebook and Twitter, comments of followers are more reserved. Madianou and Miller coined the concept of "polymedia" through which they try to illustrate different personal relation to different SNS. As both authors point out, one "cannot easily treat each new media independently since they form part of a wider media ecology in which the meaning and usage of anyone depends on its relationship to others[43]" (Horst and Miller *et. al* 2012:16). As I will argue in my theoretical chapter, authors dealing with the framework of symbolic interactionism suggests that user behavior adequates itself to different SNS': much like people interact differently in a church or in a bar, interaction in different online platforms is also context appropriate.

Having observed and recorded these interactions, I took a further step by participating in online activities of Instagram users. I posted comments on group discussion threads in the comment section and liked and shared CGI Instagrammers content. The establishing of rapport had to be done in a careful manner, since to put questions repeatedly without offering equal contributions to the group goals or topic of conversation would usually breach online "etiquette", making me unpopular, and ultimately ignored by the community. For this reason, I paid attention to the way other followers' comment and participate in discussions, adapting myself to their style of commenting.

Coupled with observation and participation in Instagram, I conducted eighteen interviews from the period of 3rd of April to 17th of May 2019 with followers of CGI

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[43] For instance, as mentioned in Horst and Miller *et. al* (2012:16), ethnography on US college students, author shows that breaking relationships through SNS has different weight if it is done via Skype, email or Facebook.

Influencers in order to comprehend what does it mean for them to consume this particular content, what makes it attractive, and how do they get involved with it? Additional questions relevant for my research related to the difference between other popular influencers and those such as Miquela, the type of agency CGI Instagrammers have, how CGI Instagrammer followers reflect about their own positioning as users, and the question of self-representation in SNS'.

The criteria I used for selecting my interlocutors was based on frequency of engagement, *i.e.* how often I would notice comments on the posts of certain CGI Instagrammers by their followers. I then proceeded to divide them into three groups based on the type of interaction and their level of self-reflection: fans, who address CGI in a way as they are familiar with them; reflective users, being those who are more astute or approach CGI as a new paradigm of communication between humans and AI; and, "haters", people who are annoyed by the CGI Instagrammers content and the aforementioned familiar way other followers address them.

In the beginning, responsiveness to my inquiries in DM's (direct messages) was low. My assumption is that I did not have enough of "legitimacy" on Instagram due to my poor following (*circa* 40 followers). After I changed my Instagram profile picture (originally it was painting of Paul Klee "Angelus Novus") to one of myself posing in front of a wall full of graffiti and asked my friends to boost my following on Instagram, the responsiveness of my interlocutors significantly changed.

Furthermore, I managed to be methodologically cautious in avoiding isolating my interlocutors from their everyday lives, because I decided to conduct these interviews in DM's instead of video-call on Skype or via email. By doing that, they could "scroll" through Instagram content, as well as switch from one SNS' to another, just as they do regularly in their everyday engagement, while answering my questions by "chatting" in a more natural

26

way. Time framing for the interviews was avoided, as my interlocutors could write to me whenever they had the will or time through their smartphones or other electronic devices. As it is common in ethnographic writing and, in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the interviewees, I decided to preserve their anonymity by changing their names.

Lastly, I noticed the need to engage my research questions in an interdisciplinary way (Budka 2011) since phenomena as the one presented in this thesis encompasses many layers of interaction in the current globalized world. I find correspondence with Daniel Miller's observation in that the study of dominant and global SNS needs to be complemented by connecting scholarly work in other domains to bolster our claims and help broaden the discussion in current debates (Miller and Horst 2012:157). With this in aim, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with experts from the fields of 3D design and machine learning. They are, respectively, Himanshu Choudhary, Former Architect, 3D Artist at Studio Horák, and currently Senior Visualization Artist at Negativ_VA Prague; and, Giorgos Tolias, a post-doctoral researcher at the Center of Machine Perception (CMP) in CTU Prague. I presented my thesis topic and arranged interviews through Skype, separately. Their input helped me to understand the technical aspects of CGI interaction and SNS' platforms, and to provide feedback for the theoretical framing of my data.

Chapter Two - The Person and the Virtual Other

2.1 Introduction

The rapidity with which new technologies emerge has considerable impact on the ability of scholars to construct new meanings in dynamics of the relationship between society and individual. In order to analyze how, and possibly why, categories of the self and person manifest online, and if and how they may be relevant for the personhood in general, this thesis conducts a case study research on the interaction between CGI Instagrammers' audience interaction with CGI Instagrammers.

Considering every attempt to holistically approach this subject as rendered to fail due to high complexity of the issue, this study engages with it dialectically. While addressing what Meyer Fortes refers to as "the perennial problem of how individual and society are interconnected in mutual regulation" (Fortes 1987:251), anthropology as a discipline has an inescapable imperative to examine and reexamine the ways in which distinctions of the individual, the person, the self and the other can be understood. Hence, in the following discussion, I will explore whether traditional anthropological and sociological understandings of "person," "self" and "other" can be productively applied to comprehend today's digital ecosystem. I will trace how anthropologists Grace Harris and Meyer Fortes contributed to our understanding of these concepts in the late 1980s, while keeping in mind that both draw their conceptualization from the discipline's forefathers G.H. Mead and Marcel Mauss, respectively. This investigation will foster a more nuanced understanding of these intricate concepts which will form the main analytical concepts to be used throughout the thesis.

Moreover, the literature on digital anthropology imbued with grounded sociological analysis is helpful to understand how negotiations of the self, the other and the person change in virtual spaces. Therefore, I will briefly introduce the seminal literature on this concept, and then juxtapose this literature with the nascent anthropological theory of Tom Boellstorff by

concentrating on his notion of indexicality as central to understanding the mediation of the virtual, in addition to Laura Robinson's idea of the symbolic interactionism theory of the "self-ing online". Having discussed these aspects, I will implement the aforementioned theoretical framework for the research I have completed during the past twelve months on the SNS Instagram. Here, I explored the relationship between the CGI Instagrammers and their audience in order to discuss specific analytical challenges relevant for drawing clear lines of "personhood" in the digital age.

2.2 Persons and Selves: Traditional Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives

2.2.1 Harris on Concepts of Individual, Self, and Person

It is not easy to distinguish who is considered to be a person, what does this exactly mean and how it differs from having a selfhood or, in more psychoanalytical jargon, subjectivity or individuality. In her article titled, "Concepts of Individual, Self, and Person in Description and Analysis," anthropologist G.G. Harris emphasizes the ongoing need for anthropology to clearly distinguish these terms in order to provide clarity for individual ethnographic accounts, enable cross-cultural comparisons, as well as to enhance the analysis of societal change over time. Harris outlines his proposal in the following way: "individual as a member of the humankind", "self as locus of experience", and "person as agent-in-society" (Harris 1989:599). This is helpful for research because this outline will allow me to define clearly the notions which I am going to use in the analytical part of my case study.

Harris defines the individual as a single member of humankind, where all humans are born as individuals but do not necessarily gain the status of the person. For example, children are individuals with the potential to develop "normally". Normal individuals are those capable of "the performance of meaning-laden conduct" which is comprehensible within a given social construct and the principal example of such conduct is the mastery of language (*ibid.*

1989:600). Ultimately, for Harris, the individual is just a single unit of humanity, one of many, bearing no social markers with respect to social and cultural setting.

However, Harris states that a person can be understood as an "agent in society" (*ibid.* 1989:602). To have agency is not only to make decisions but also to possess certain capacities which enable perpetual social inclusion. Here, societally and culturally specific characteristics that allow an individual to be recognized as a person go beyond the development of language alone. Rather, the person might paradoxically be considered as the least personal thing about us. In this sense, defined and shaped entirely by external factors, socially and temporally malleable, a person's characteristics are considered as dependent on the elements of the society within which they are embedded. Hence, the agency that a person holds can only be understood *vis-a-vis* its relationship with others. For example, as a member of society, an individual cannot claim personhood for her/himself but must instead be publicly recognized as an agent (*ibid.* 1989:602). Consequently, reflexivity of others is the key part of the personhood: a person's behavior, value and social identity are all curated by others' expectations. Similarly, a person changes depending on the social context. Thus, rather than being fixed or stable, personhood is an evolving series of roles an individual play. That is, a person is co-constituted by its immediate audience and tied together by common societal norms and values. By giving examples of enslavement or imprisonment in a concentration camp, Harris notes how one can be stripped from their personhood or agentive capacity (*ibid.* 1989:604). She also points out that numerous ethnographies document notions of personhood among non-human entities, such as the spirits of deceased, inanimate objects, deities etc. (*ibid.* 1989:602).

The third concept Harris discusses - the self - can be understood as a human's "locus of experience including experience of that human's own someoneness" (*ibid.* 1989:601). Here, the self is marked by continuity and reflexivity, and represents the private sphere one

30

can experience only alone. That is, one can never have access to other people's selves. According to Harris, the self in public is dressed up in the roles played by the social person, and transforms depending on the social context within which it is positioned and the public it interacts with. Besides, the seeming mutability of one's identity is anchored in the self: we reflect on what happens to us as a person when the self is alone with us (*ibid.* 1989:601). Thus, the self, being inaccessible to anyone but the human who experiences it, cannot be the object of social science.

Harris also elucidates that the hierarchy between the individual, person and the self can vary in different circumstances. Among these three categories of analysis, anthropology tends to privilege the person, but, as Harris notes, can sometimes focus on the collective, and thus on individuals as groups. While the individual, the self, and the person can be treated as distinct categories of analysis, they are not secluded from each other, or from societal and cultural transformations (*ibid.* 1989:608).

2.2.2 Mead: The Self and The Generalized Other

In her article Harris draws on a long tradition of studies in both anthropology and sociology in order to produce an outline for these concepts. Regarding the concept of self, Harris draws from the works of George Herbert Mead, best exemplified in his book "Mind, Self, and Society" (1934) which constitutes the main theoretical ground of symbolic interactionism. Mead's insights, once paired with Harris' outline, serve to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the concept, which will be used in this thesis to further understand the relationship between the self and society.

According to Mead, the self is a psychological notion developed through phases of reflexive "symbolic interactions" *i.e.* imitative practices and gestures (play and games), conversations and their internalization. These symbolic interactions allow an individual to

31

perform, or, to "play at" another within a projected social surrounding. Following this interaction, an individual reproduces the "generalized other" (Mead [1934]1972:154). Thus, when an individual envisions what kind of behavior is expected of her/him, she/he takes the standpoint of the "generalized other". On the one hand, and as Mead illustrates, when a child enacts a single role at a time (*e.g.* of a teacher, a model, a barista, etc.) it is called the "significant other". On the other hand, when a child is supposed to internalize several "significant others", for example in a football game where rules condition different roles, making a child internalize the roles of all participants involved and be concurrent with them in a given setting, Mead defines this as the "generalized other" (*ibid.* 1972:154,155).

Furthermore, Mead argues that the conduct of an individual in a given social setting is of utmost importance for distinguishing the "me" from the "I". Whereas "me" is constituted by one's [knowledge] of "the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself [sic] assumes" (*ibid.* 1972:175), "I" appears as one responds to "me" by taking an action. In other words, whereas "me" is about being cognizant of the social situation, "I" represents a reaction to the social situation and is a result of the conduct itself. Hence, while Mead refrains from taking the difference between "me" and "I" as a merely fictitious one, he centers the (inter)action as the catalyzer of their distinction. To sum up, according to both Mead and Harris, the self is an emergent response to the generalized other:

> "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at
> birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is,
> develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a
> whole and to other individuals within that process" (*ibid.* 1972:135).

2.2.3 Fortes and Mauss: Personhood as Path and Abstract Personhood

By taking into account the genealogy of understanding 'personhood' in anthropology as traditionally traced to the foundational work of Marcel Mauss, Harris considers Mauss' own description as imprecise and too ambiguous (*ibid.* 1989:609). Unlike Harris, in his book

"Religion, Morality and the Person: Essays on Tallensi Religion" (1987) Meyer Fortes explicitly developed Mauss' conception of the "person" in the ethnographic case of Tallensi (Ghana). According to Fortes, strict rules among the Tallensi regulate the attainment of full personhood and form the basis on which every member is aware of their standing in society (Fortes 1987:248). By drawing on his findings of becoming a person in the Tallensi, which is regulated by performing a wide range of ritual norms (*i.e.* protocols on killing and eating animals, regulations regarding property, marriage and inheritance), Fortes contends that the understanding of personhood among the Tallensi postulates the multigenerational character of the 'person' as the most important aspect (*ibid.* 1987:271). That is, a person is understood chiefly in terms of their kinship and ancestry as the name, the clan, and the descent of a member are all inscribed with a set of values that are imbued within that person. This process demonstrates how social values are transmitted and extend beyond the life and experience of single individuals or generations.

Nonetheless, as the generation that follows is equally important to the establishment of the 'person', prior ancestry alone is not enough to qualify for Tallensi personhood. Rather, another crucial factor that Fortes notes is that no one can fully establish their personhood until the time of their death. Consequently, as achieving 'proper' death (in which the society agrees that the mortal was slain by the spirit of his ancestors) is essential for oneself to become an ancestor in the afterlife, as it qualifies one as having truly been a 'person' (*ibid.* 1987:258).

Besides, echoing Harris' distinctions that the "individual and collective are not mutually exclusive but are rather two sides of the same structural complex" (*ibid.* 1987:281), Fortes suggests that for the Tallensi personhood is not an individual practice but a product of socially performed and ritualized interactions. Hence, individual traits, such as being good and kind, or evil and unkind, as long as they do not provide continuity to the lineage and clan, do not play an important role in attaining personhood. Therefore, as "personhood comes thus

33

to be in its essence externally oriented," "self-awareness means, in the first place, awareness of oneself as a *personne morale* [social person, *cf*. Mauss in Euvres 1969] rather than as an idiosyncratic individual" (*ibid.* 1987:285).

Fortes highlights another aspect of Tallensi society by claiming that society is capable of granting the label of personhood "on any object it chooses, human or non-human, the living or the dead, animate or inanimate, above all, both on singular and on collective objects" (*ibid.* 1987:253). In this sense, Fortes understands and treats lineage among the Tallensi as a person. Here, as an example of a non-human person, Fortes refers to the Tallensi tribal totem, which is the specific breed of crocodile. While regarded as a person within particular societal and cultural limitations, this kind of sacred crocodile is considered as the "vehicle of ancestral immortality" (that of clan elders). Considering that "[t]o kill one of these is like killing a person" (*ibid.* 1987:249,250), it can be affirmed that the sacred crocodile is part of a generational cycle of attaining personhood for Tallensi clansmen.

2.2.4 Harris, Mead and Fortes: Concluding Remarks

Anthropologists perceive personhood by looking at the ways a sentient human being comes to be constituted in any given culture as a socially committed person with publicly recognized status, roles, obligations and entitlements. Becoming a person is marked with rituals, rites of passage and other culturally specific recognized markers. While the features that Fortes describes are particular to Tallensi society, many of the elements present are more broadly applicable. Fortes, and Harris for that matter, agree that personhood—that is, societal recognition of a person—is a path. People have biographies, "life histories" or "moral careers"; they are living on a path in time, aging and accruing social capital based on various rites of societal passage, such as marriage or having children (*cf*. Goffman 1961, Mauss 1938). Yet, as both authors note, personhood does not always refer to human beings. According to Fortes, the complex relationships between humans, ancestors, animals and

34

spirits that make up humanity in Tallensi society are only one of several factors in determining personhood. Likewise, Harris notes that there are a number of ethnographic examples that suggest how personhood might in some contexts be bestowed on non-human beings, objects or concepts. However, I find it important to distinguish between forms of personhood given to non-human entities, such as Tallensi's sacred crocodile and personhood as a path. That is, while sacred crocodiles play an important part in the developmental path of Tallensi personhood and are considered a person by Tallensi clansmen, the crocodile still cannot travel the path of personhood; its personhood is only relevant in regard to the Tallensi clansmen path to personhood. These distinct forms of personhood are going to be particularly useful later in research when I attempt to describe relationship between the CGI Instagrammers and their audience/followers.

Traditional anthropological approaches over selfhood and personhood focus primarily on the role of social interactions. As the fundamental aspect of human society is the exchange between individual and society, social interactions provide space for the agency of an individual to act upon the "learned" selfhood. Still, symbolic interactionism is often critiqued for not taking in regard the situation, environment and power relations which influence the perspective of actors and therefore influence action (*cf.* Burbank 2009). Having this in mind, I believe that examination of Fortes' case study, together with conceptualization of Harris and Mead, proved the opposite. In this sense, it is important to stress out that actions of actors are dependent on situation and environment where that action occurs. In other words, positioned in the specific context, environment and situation, perspective of an actor changes, thus influencing the outcome of the action. Consequently, in the third chapter of my thesis, I am going to discuss power and economical relationship and how they influence negotiation of the self and the person online, and then connect it to my case study.

Following this line of analysis to translate concepts of the self, the other and personhood into new settings requires a nuanced understanding. In the next section, I attempt to track and define the virtual situation as an ever-changing paradigm in academic texts since the late '80s in order to show how the conceptualizations outlined thus far can be positioned within the virtual. Ultimately, I will situate my own research and conduct the analysis of my case study with the tools provided by Harris, Mead and Fortes.

2.3 Persons and Selves in The Virtual and The Physical

To those who have come of age in the digital era, self-representation and interaction online – primarily through SNS – are some of the primary means by which this generation communicates and represents itself to their peers and society at large. As such, when explaining how the self and personhood are negotiated regarding new communication technologies, it is important to understand how these concepts manifest at this moment in time. Anxiety between the discourse of the self and personhood in the physical and virtual[44] is already a familiar topic in academic debates and a number of authors call into question traditional understandings of these anthropological subjects.

Academic texts on the given topic started to emerge in the late '80s and early '90s and were predominantly written by a small group of computationally savvy authors from the U.S (see for example selection of articles in Whitehead & Wesch 2012 or Turkle 1995, Hillis 1999). Most of these texts were based on the research of multi-user domains (henceforth MUD) such as online chat rooms, role playing games and blogs. Personal computers and more importantly, access to the Internet, were relegated to a limited number of users. Most of these authors draw theories from such groups of MUD users and made generalized theories on the self within the physical/virtual binary. The MUD users were repeatedly analyzed as loners

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[44] In this text I treat physical, 'real', actual, offline; and virtual, digital or online; as synonyms. It is possible to craft frameworks in which these terms differ, but for the purposes of the short form of my thesis, I omit these differences, and use the concepts interchangeably.

who constructed multiple new online identities of selves to escape their everyday "real" life (Turkle, 1995).

The emerging virtual sphere was often treated as a new paradigm where traditional anthropological and sociological theories do not apply and should be either reconstructed or made anew. These considerably outdated positions in the early literature on the advent of new technologies and social media consider the virtual and physical as separate dimensions (see for example Turkle 1995, Hillis 1999,), sometimes going as far as to contemplate the possible transcendence of the virtual self from the physical body (Turkle 1995:187). Although this dichotomous approach is still present (see for example Buttler 2011, Lee 2011, Whitlock & Martinez 2013), as early as 1988 anthropologist Pfaffenberger recognized the limits of the virtual/physical binary and cautioned against what he termed "technological somnambulism" and technological determinism in anthropology. Here, technological somnambulism is understood as the fallacy of treating the virtual as a neutral space without linkages between society and culture, while technological determinism mistakenly assumes that such linkages are always present; Pfaffenberger instead calls for an understanding of technology as "humanized nature", "a social construction of our surrounding nature" (Pfaffenberger 1988:244).

In due course, a new front for theoreticians who understood the incorporation of new digital technologies *i.e.* social media into the everyday lives of people in more nuanced and integrated ways emerged (Robinson 2007, Miller & Horst 2012, Wajcman *et al*. 2010, Boellstorff *et al*. 2012). These scholars take into consideration newer internet populations, ones who show preferences for wide range of online activities, including, but not limiting, their scope the MUD user. Also, internet users have changed considerably since the first studies on MUD users were published. Thus, a new generation of writers like Laura Robinson (2007), and later Russell Belk (2013) counterpose these "futuristic" explanations of

transcendence of the virtual self from the body with the approaches of symbolic interactionism (Cooley 1902, Mead 1934, Goffman 1959). They treat the virtual as yet another arena where process of socialization functions in the same way as in physically mediated context. Robinson's study is going to be helpful when I attempt to interpret the online communication from my ethnographic account.

2.3.1 Robinson: "Self-ing" Online

According to Robinson, "in creating online selves, users do not seek to transcend the most fundamental aspects of their offline selves. Rather, users bring into being bodies, personas, and personalities framed according to the same categories that exist in the offline world" (Robinson 2007:94). Grounding her analysis in the symbolic interactionist framework discussed earlier, Robinson argues that the negotiation of the virtual self is constructed in the same manner as it is done in the physical setting. Thus, the method is the same, but situated differently since the virtual medium omits the physical presence. Robinson refers to this paradigmatic shift as "online self-ing" or "cyberselfing" (*ibid.* 2007:103). She postulates that "online self-ing" constitutes a new online I/me couplet where, for example, one's profile page on the SNS enables the "I" to display the "self" to other online users. When one creates a profile page on the SNS, its curation (selection of photos, texts, and other content) is fashioned based on the anticipated reaction of other online users *i.e.* the "generalized other" online. In anticipation of that reaction: the presence and ensuing appraisal, one's "I" pleads for the gaze of the "generalized other" online through posts and comments, online group membership and other information shared on SNS's. In Robinson's words: "Once the 'I' perceives the cyberother's reaction, this reflexive constitution produces the 'cyberme'" (*ibid.* 2007:104). If Mead's terminology is used, this kind of negotiation of the self is the outcome of the collective construction of the online "I" and "me" – "self" with the online "other".

Depending on the SNS they habituate, users online use textual, sound and/or visual mediums to translate the communicative practices from the physical to a virtual framework. Then, one's interpretation signals and cues the physical, and shifts to the interpretation of those mediums online. Therefore, Robinson explains that "online self-ing" demands a new set of tools to read signs and symbols presented by others, or in Goffmanian terminology, what is "given" and what is "given off" (*ibid.* 2007:106). If it is presupposed that one curates – "gives" her/his profile page to look in the best light possible, other users are aware of this, and they inspect instead what is "given off". Robinson argues that virtual communicative practices, just as ones in physical surroundings, are based on the interpretation of cues which give one off (*ibid.* 2007:106). Moreover, she stresses that cuing in the physical world is redefined online through symbolic interactionism (*ibid.* 2007:106).

Robinson suggests that, like offline negotiations of the self, the virtual negotiation of the self is also grounded in ways as understood by symbolic interactionists. In her interpretation, the virtual paradigm redefines communication between oneself and others online, and one has to adopt a new set of skills in order to interpret what is "given" and "given off". Therefore, she emphasizes that the way one negotiates their sense of self online does not radically change, as the authors of seminal texts on this topic suggest, but rather the self is redefined.

2.3.2 Boellstorff's Indexicality in the Digital Anthropology

In order to develop Robinson's epistemological argument, I will briefly discuss Tom Boellstorff's analogy of indexicality (Boellstorff in Horst and Miller *et. al* 2012). Moreover, unlike Robinson who criticizes the "futuristic" approach towards the self in the physical/virtual relationship as dichotomous, Boellstorff is critical towards approaches which see this dichotomy as "blurred" and "fused" (*ibid.* 2012:39). Robinson demonstrates that social science does not need completely new theories to understand new phenomena such as

SNS, while Boellstorff's main argument is that anthropology should treat the physical/virtual relationship as a methodological approach, primarily conducted through participant observation, not as an object of study (*ibid.* 2012:40). Therefore, Boellstorff gives examples from his ethnographic fieldwork of "Second Life" and other "virtual worlds"[45] like "Sims Online" and "There.com", in order to establish the actuality of the online/virtual, as a separate and distinct place that cannot be conflated with one's physical environment (*ibid.* 2012:48,49). For example, when one is "logged in" to Second Life, that individual's attention is immersed in this platform and acts according to the context her/his avatar in Second Life is situated. When interacting with other avatars, her/his avatar behaves differently if they are "dancing in a bar" or "going to the church", or, like in Boellstorff's example, try to put ice skates on their avatar (*ibid.* 2012:46). Hence, activities in the Second Life platform are particularly related to the platform, and what one's avatar is "doing" there. So, learning how to put ice skates on in Second Life will not help one to put ice skates in the actual skating rink. Boellstorff argues that the "online" can be seen as an index, where both the online and offline worlds are constructed and interpreted upon the "context of social interaction" (*ibid.* 2012:50-53).

According to Boellstorff, individuals relate to their online avatars and to each other's avatars in these "virtual worlds" like Second Life, *indexically*. When one's avatar in the "virtual world" communicates with another it is "a causal relationship [which] 'points back' from the index to the referent" (*ibid.* 2012:51). As smoke contextually indicates fire, one's avatar in the "virtual world" *indexically* signifies one's physical existence. Hence, the actual and virtual "stand in an inter indexical-relationship" (*ibid.* 2012:52). As Boellstorff demonstrates, the virtual sphere is basically yet another field for research, along with the

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[45] "Second Life is a virtual world—a place of human culture realized by a computer programme through the Internet. In a virtual world, you typically have an avatar body and can interact with other persons around the globe who are logged in at the same time; the virtual world remains even as individuals shut their computers off, because it is housed in the 'cloud', on remote servers" (Boellstorff in Horst & Miller *et al* 2012:45).

physical sphere, for the project of digital anthropology, and these fields should not be put in a hierarchical order.

Boellstorff's concept of indexicality, as well as his epistemological argument claiming that anthropologists who deal with the digital or virtual should treat it as a methodological tool, not as an object of study, is particularly useful for the field. The problematic aspect of his work is that he refers to the "virtual worlds" like Second Life. While it can be argued that these platforms may encourage one to get "lost" or immersed into the virtual worlds, most other online platforms and SNS function differently. Today one has many more gateways to the Internet via many 'smart' devices, and one does not need to go to a PC or to "log in" in order to surf the Internet or visit a specific SNS. Today the Internet reaches us. For example, even if I do not want to engage with my Facebook account while reading a book, a notification on my Kindle pops out, or it "dings" on my laptop. Even if I decide to ignore it, I am still aware of it, and I acknowledge the signification/signal. I claim that virtual behavior is most often a fusion of several online and offline behaviors, disconnecting the enveloping experience of the internet. Hence in most cases, except maybe playing online games or visiting "virtual worlds" which Boellstorff writes about, the involvement of offline and online functions in a more intertwined manner, and that is where his methodological approach loses its importance.

Moreover, contemplating the physical/virtual in the indexical, not hierarchical way, dissuades one to romanticize "pre-digital" times when people hung out in the more "natural" way, and children played outside and so on. Also, it dissuades "futuristic" ways of seeing the advance of digital technology as the separation from mind and body. The same goes for how individuals relate to each other on the SNS. The negotiation of the self on SNS through accounts and other types of communication is an indexical relationship to a physical/non-digital existence. One can integrate offline activities via online interaction, such as reading

TripAdvisor on the phone before deciding to go to a restaurant, but then again, one can Instagram[46] their lunch, pointing their offline behavior back to the online community.

2.3.3 Robinson and Boellstorff: Rethinking Personhood Online

Although Robinsons' text was written in 2007, when the SNS user population was in the millions, now it is in the billions. The proliferation of smart technologies and devices is even more pervasive now than it was in Boellstorff's study (2012), and since thinking about selves and persons in the online sphere spurred even more discussion, both Robinson and Boellstorff make viable arguments today and are often cited in the literature on the digital realm. By combining these two aspects and adding them to traditional anthropological theory, I am able to understand more recent online phenomena in regard to the negotiation of the self, the other and the person. Accordingly, I pose Robinsons' *online self-ed I/me* couplet with the *indexical relation* to the physical self, where the online or virtual is not seen as a transcending experience, wiping everything we know about ourselves and others. Instead, our virtual experiences could be seen as part of a novel cultural framework, which we need to redefine and rethink more comprehensively.

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[46] Colloquial way of saying to take a photo and then post/share it on Instagram.

2.4 The Virtual Other

In this section of my thesis, I explore the relationship between the CGI Instagrammers and their audience. By using empirical examples from conversations held with Instagram users and observation of the field, I discuss the specific analytical challenges relevant for anthropological understanding of personhood in the digital age.
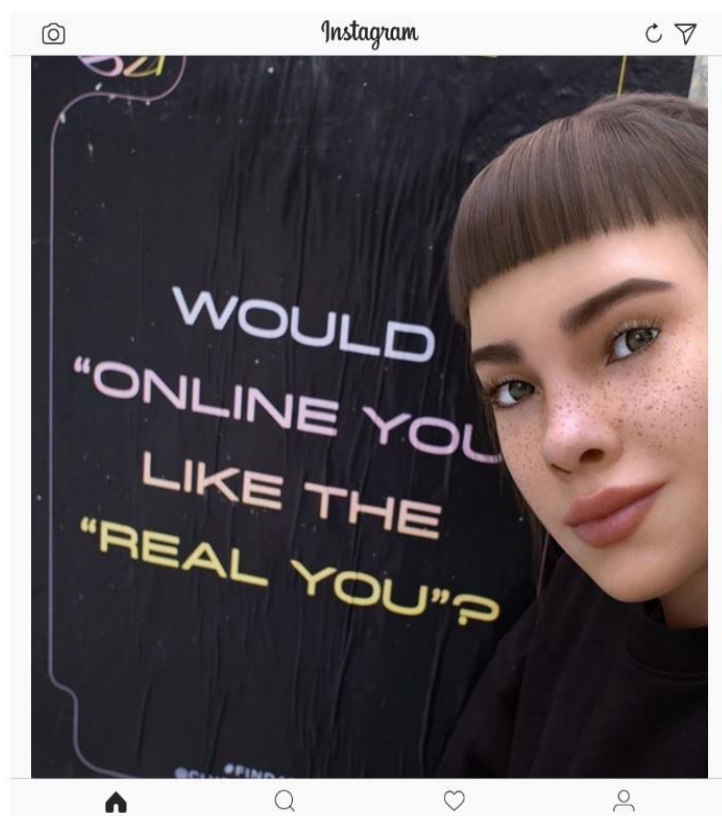

Figure 3 Lil Miquela

As it has been outlined in the previous sections, according to Median terminology the negotiation of the self ('me' and 'I' couplet) is based and constructed on the interaction with both the "significant other" and "generalized other". Consequently, and as understood by Robinson, in the digital ecosystem negotiation of self, implying interaction with online "significant other" and "generalized other", is translated to the online "self-ing". Given that online self and other are indexical to the physical self and other (Boellstorff), online is interpreted as yet another cultural and societal context where one has to adopt a new set of skills in order to interpret what is "given" and "given off" by other on online platforms.

Still, it is important to have in mind that online spaces are considered as public but in a much broader and less defined sense. This is particularly true because online spaces are not contextualized spatially bound spaces and thus the number of agents present on these is

43

almost limitless. Hence, identifying the agent behind the digital action (cuing what is "given" and "given off", and, at who others online indicate) on online spaces such as SNS sometimes presents an obstacle. In my study case of a CGI Instagrammers, the other online, such as Miquela, is not the representation of a real person, but a computer-generated image made up by company, and as such, Miquela, as an "individual" exists only in the online sphere of SNS. Part of Miquela's online popularity results from the fact that large amount of her audience takes only what is "given" and find it hard to cue what is "given off". Miquela, as the rest of the CGI Instagramers can be easily discharged as "false" individual but only if the online society is able to recognize this falsehood, or, for that matter want to discharge her.

That is, despite the fact that it is clearly stated on Miquela's Instagram account BIO that Miquela is a "robot", "her" followers seem either unsure or oblivious to this reality[47]. Still, regardless of whether they know that Miquela is CGI, or they think Miquela is robot, almost all comments address Miquela as if "she" is a "person" (using "she/her" pronouns). Miquela's audience discusses either directly with "her" or about "her" through wide variety of topics. In this sense, is it is not only that there exists a specific linguistic relations towards the "other" in relationship between CGI and the followers, but rather that the relations is set on direct human basis, especially since the users address Miquela as if "she" was a living human being possessing intimacy within herself.

The recent post from 8th of May 2019 is illustrative of how many followers are involved with Miquela. One of Miquela's posts reads: "Whenever I feel down, I try to remember there's always at least ONE thing to feel grateful for and happy about. For me, it's you guys, @blawko22, and @bermudaisbae. (And hot Cheetos.) So: what's YOUR good thing for today?" The post has thirty-nine thousand likes, and there are three hundred comments, and

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[47] Besides, the case with the most of other CGI Instagrammers is similar to Miquela's and most of "their" BIO's likewise state that they are either virtual/digital influencers, models, virtual humans or robots (see Table 1).

44

most of those comment express sensitive and personal matters about their state of being, how they have (un)supportive family, love problems, and their insecurities and how to overcome them. In one of the comments, gratefulness is expressed because that person left her abusive stepfather.

Struck by the level of intimacy of certain followers of Miquela, I asked my interlocutors about their opinions on what Miquela[48] represents to them and how they feel about "her". A case in mind is Matty, who has throughout the last two months of my observation commented on most of the posts of all three Brud Instagrammers[49], responding to the posts' content, and often getting a reply. He states the following:

> "Miquela and Blawko and Bermuda are literally like my friends! They follow my social media and they are just so amazing to me. I don't consider them avatars. They are robots which were created by a company named @brud.fyi, Miquela is super sweet, we occasionally talk [in discussion threads] and it's the best feeling ever. She is such an inspiration and has so many aspirations to make the world a better place and I feel like that's what the main and only focus should be. Not what's going on behind the scenes ya know what I mean." (11.04.2019, Matty,23)

Matt is a fan of theirs, and feels entitled of his relationship with Brud Instagrammers, finds them meaningful and inspiring. Although in a conversation with me[50] he adapts the rhetoric of Brud stating that they are "robots", he still hints that that it is not completely true ("Not what's going on behind the scenes ya know what I mean"), emphasizing that we should focus on their deeds and positive aspirations, rather on who or what they are.

Another of my interlocutors, Maria, fan of Brud Instagramers, looks at them in analogous way:

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[48] Or other CGI Instagrammer they follow and is the topic of our conversation.
[49] Miquela, Blawko, Bermuda
[50] I presented myself as Anthropology and Sociology student who is doing a research about Instagramers like Miquela.

> "I consider them[51] people yes because to me, the viewer, they're just living their lives. I think what especially Miquela stands for is amazing-she represents the outcast artsy kids and is advocate for diversity. She's a "robot" that is racially ambiguous, a female that is empowering and spreading nothing but love. Even if she's physically not real, she's real enough to have an impact on people with her art, music, fashion and her online presence. She seems genuinely nice and cares about her supporters […] I think it reflects on her followers by giving them just a glimpse of another form of expression. I do think we should behave more like she does though, spread positivity and like you said forget the heteronormative binaries. We, as people regardless of where we come from and our circumstances deserve to be able to be ourselves, be happy and be successful. I think this relates to people of all forms- gay, straight, trans, black, white, Asian, tall, short, skinny, thick, etc. She does represent individuality in a world full of (and right now a country [US] full of) people trying to tear each other down. And I think that the person or people that created her are trying to show that through her." (9-11.04.2019, Maria, 22)

Maria considers them people and, despite knowing that they are not real, she considers Brud's characterization of them as "robots" as a positive thing, which breaks down essentialist categories of heteronormativity, race and ethnicity; and provides "a glimpse of another form expression" which is much needed considering the world of conflictual and antagonistically related identities we live in. As Miquela presents an ideal it is assumed that one should adapt her attitude in order to foster more cohesive society, one where everybody will have same chances for good life, no matter who they are and where they come from.

Of similar opinion is Lucas who, when talking about another popular (non-Brud) CGI Instagrammer Cade, states:

> "The most interesting thing about these people is the fan base itself, the way they react like these are real people. Or other big YouTubers talking about

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[51] Brud CGI Instagrammers

Cade as if he's real. But to me it doesn't matter. Cade, the avatar, seems to be doing something good for society *with* the impact he has on his followers. He's a kind presence. His entire personality is that of one that praises and pushes for positivity and kindness." (05.04.2019, Lucas, 21)

Lucas, although amused by the discourse among CGI Instagrammers fan base, admires Cade based on the worldview he promotes among his followers.

In another interview, Jasna discusses the way how people represent themselves online, and juxtaposes it with Miquela' narrative and fanbase:

"I was drawn to how she wasn't human, but she was acting more real than social influencers. You often only see the best bits of people's lives online, but Miquela was talking about her past and her struggles, so the irony was intriguing of how she wasn't "real" but actually "more real" than humans… I think Miquela is clever in the fact she shares posts where she's not doing much except for something casual like sorting through her closet and shares when she's not feeling so good. It's like we as "real people" try living fake lives online whereas she is doing the opposite. I don't know if that's the intention but that's what I've noticed with her in particular […] That's quite encouraging towards going and impressionable followers to talk about their struggles and remind them not everything is as perfect as social media portrays." (10-12.04.2019, Jasna, 26)

Jasna believes that people's presentation online is not authentic, that most show only good side, especially in case social influencers. This creates unreal standards and makes their audience less worthy. Miquela's case does the opposite. Although she is completely fabricated, she embraces "humanity" as it is - with both the positive and negative sides and, by encouraging her followers to do the same, Miquela is reframing the discourse of online representation.

When I asked her about other part of audience, who is not so tolerant towards Brud Instagrammers, she answered in following way:

47

"I see her as a person, because whether she's a robot or CGI or whatever, there's people behind her, Blawko and Bermuda. I talk to them like I would to anyone, I don't see the point in people talking down to any of them or saying "you're fake" SNAP or whatever, like there's nothing to achieve from that"

Although most of my interlocutors were of the opinion that CGI Instagrammers do more good than harm, I was also encountered by diverging opinions. For example, Mark stated during our conversation that I have an account with "literally 53 followers not made even a month ago", and that he knows that it is a "setup account" and that he is going to "search me up". After I proved my legitimacy, which I had to establish through conversation, because in this case, small number of "followers" translated to lack of my credibility online, Mark became friendlier and explained reasons of his outburst and his opinion about CGI Instagrammers in a following way:

"Cause it's weird that when I put a hate comment someone messages me. Okay, sorry, but I just don't get it. A teacher at my school talks about them as if they're her neighbors, like wtf? I know it's not even remotely real, what's the point of them anyway? That's like me talking to SpongeBob… So, it's like drama on Instagram […] Well, I hope u do well with ur project thing bro, sorry I was aggravated at the beginning. It's just I got lil whatever-her-name-is fans messaging me cause they think this shit is real. Most of fans are really defensive of her." (11.04.2019, Mark, 18)

Also, the third current of opinion during my interviewing considered CGI as a new paradigm for future communication between humans and AI. This is well illustrated in conversation with Hana, who declares:

"I have what I think is different view of our Brud fam[family]. They are the forerunners for how we will learn to respond to or even socially view what will become the AI's or androids. Miquela and company [Blawko and Bermuda] will teach us how people see bots, which will help us to design

48

them with acceptable personalities while avoiding the Momo effect[52] But like them or not, the Brud fam of bots are the humble beginnings of droids in social services." (9-11.04.2019, Hana, 50)

Throughout a lengthy interview, Hana explained her point of view, saying that "It's up to us to determine real, and we have the ability to make things to became real" hence:

"Miquela has a body. It's just that she's in a CPU and someone's imagination but in this regard, she's got a body and a mind. I treat her the same that I treat all people who seem like her: Blawko and Bermuda are both her friends. I keep trying to positively encourage them. […] They decided to follow me, so the point of involvement begun there. As they have opened their lives to me, I have learned about my Brud fam and care about them, as I do my other friends. […] One day we'll frequently have android/robot companions. And they will play an important social role. To perfect degree, I can't say, but people will both hate and love them, build illegal ones, and they will save lives, help people with disabilities and generally contribute to humanity."

With these empirical insights from my ethnography, I try to illustrate the gist of understanding of relationships between the CGI Instagrammers such as Miquela, and their followers. A particular caption on Miquela's account directly addresses questions which most of my interlocutors tackle states: "I'm not human, but am I still a person?" From an anthropological perspective, and particularly those criteria that Fortes and Harris lay out, the personhood status of CGI Instagrammers such as Miquela is conceivable. Beside the convincing narrative that her Instagram posts weave, Miquel is not taking the "path" of personhood that Fortes and Harris deem essential. In this sense, the fact that Miquela followers speak about "her" either positively or negatively does not matter as much as the fact that Miquela's account has incredibly large audience. According to Fortes and Harris,

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[52] "The challenge is the latest viral concern /social media fad/urban legend going around Facebook parenting groups and schools. It's described as a "suicide game" which combines shock imagery and hidden messaging, and it supposedly encourages kids to attempt dangerous stunts, including suicide" Retrieved from: https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/28/health/momo-challenge-youtube-trnd/index.html last accessed on 5.06.2019.

"person" is actor in society where actor's agency is understood in relationship to the others as it needs to be publicly recognized. All in all, as mentioned above, the followers are the ones who enable the generation of this type of agency. In other words, the agency exists as long as it has followers. Otherwise, they are stripped from their personhood and agentive capacity.

Still, my inquiry here is not if whether CGI Instagrammers like Miquela can be considered as person or not, but whether Miquela's personhood is only relevant regard to "her" audience. Like sacred crocodiles who are considered an "abstract" person by Tallensi and play an important part in the developmental path of Tallensi personhood, it is possible to consider Miquela in that role in regard to "her" followers. Whereas, both are relatively perpetual, sacred crocodile represents Tallensi's cyclical past, andMiquela ("forever 19") can present future to some of her audience (*i.e.* Hana "glance into the beginning of new AI-human relationship"). Also, Miquela is more "real" than "real" people online and represents a medium which follower should use measure their personhood (Jasna), or, as a possibility to undue negative stereotypes (Maria). Or, as in some cases, Miquela is compleately discarded as fictiuous (Lucas).

Therefore, I propose utilizing Mead's concept of "generalized others" to better understand the ways in which my subjects of research (the followers) craft their own selfhood through inhabiting the general attitudes of CGI instagrammers. This would both extend the classic distinction between the self and other by showing how these two interact within the digital social settings, and, also, would draw the general picture in which the CGI Instagrammers are socially enabled through the perpetual forms of social experience and interactions.

Although Miquela agency can be understood as abstract person among "her" followers. Still, it is crucial to remember that Miquela's account is not neutral medium like Tallensi crocodile.

50

Behind Miquela's account, is a company[53] - the Brud. Therefore, what one faces during interaction with the CGI Instagrammer, it is not just "self-ing" online with the online other, but instead, negotiation on self in regard to "generalized other" which is a commodity, that I christen the "virtual other", and discus its economic aspect in next chapter.

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[53] As it is case with the rest of CGI Instagrammers – Indivdual, group or company created these Instagram account, and they are sole creators of their aaccount content.

Chapter Three - Digital Turn and Platform Capitalism

The inquiry about the authenticity of personhood online as well as focus on the how personhood is negotiated in the digital space necessitates the analysis of its emergence in relation to the social and economic conditions that make it possible. Most of CGI Instagrammers' followers I observed and conversed with, discuss the impact and validity of CGI Instagrammers and are entwined with the paradigm of representation. While, what I see as a main driving force behind characters like Miquela is economic profit, is rarely seen as important among them. Additionally, the framework of symbolic interactionism I use to describe the relationship between CGI and its followers, can be criticized for not taking the power and economic relationship in consideration. Therefore, in this chapter, I will focus on the specific economic system which fostered the formation of CGI Instagrammers as "virtual other".

In order to situate my analysis and try to understand how this case fits into the economic system I am going to analyze CGI Instagramers through the historical materialist development of capitalism outlined by Nick Srniček. And additionally, reinforce and broaden the analysis with a critical assessment of Wendy Brown.

3.1 Srniček: Platform capitalism

In his book, Srniček (2017) describes "platform capitalism" as a distinct to the previous organizations of capitalism that have happened historically. Srniček traces capitalist development from the Fordist business model, characterized with mass production controlled by the "top-down managerial core" (Srnicek 2017:14). It presented change in the production, but also meant involving much larger population and urbanization, therefore mass consumption. Next shift which Srnicek describes is Post-Fordist Business Model which occurred 1970's. This meant more flexible production (personalization of goods) paralleled

with individualized consumption, also known as corporate capitalism, where interests shift from commodified product in the intellectual property and the brand. These corporations started outsourcing everything which is less profitable (like manufacturing and assembly line). Srnicek uses *Nike* company as a symbol from that time, where branding was happening in developed economies, and manufacturing was occurring in underdeveloped countries (*ibid.* 2017:22,23). This "lean" business model where branding corporations such as *Nike* sell contracts and logos, and that was new way of dominating and controlling the industry (*ibid.* 2017:23).

Development of information and communication technologies speed up this model significantly and provoked 1990's economic boom (*ibid.* 2017:18) when commercialization of, until that point non-commercialized, Internet began, followed with massive investment to this new industry, further overcoming the friction caused by space and time (*ibid.* 2017:20). This thriving of technology and Internet model set ground for today's digital-platform economy as new organizational form, and paradigm shift happened as an answer to crisis in 2008 (*ibid.* 2017:38). Fundamentally, Srnicek sees the platform capitalism as a result of a cycle of lingering movements and counter movements from Fordism to Post-Fordism to Platform, *i.e.,* when crisis endangers capitalist business mode, it gets restructured in the different shape.

Srnicek outlines main characteristic of the Platform capitalism as a new shape of capitalist business model:

1. Platforms are infrastructures serving as intermediators which connect different people and different groups of people regardless of space and time (*ibid.* 2017:43).

2. Platforms rely on "network effect", idea that the more users use platform, it becomes more valuable for everybody else. Network effect "generates a cycle whereby more

users beget more users, which leads to platforms having a natural tendency towards monopolization. It also lends platforms a dynamic of ever-increasing access to more activities, and therefore to more data" (*ibid.* 2017:45).

3. Cross-subsidization as tactic: the idea that companies will provide something for free to get more users, but then raise up the prices of another element of business (*ibid.* 2017:46).

These three features enable core aspect of the platform business, which is extraction and control of user fed data. In previous business models, main idea was to create product or sell the brand, while not having abundance of information about its usage. However, platform business model enables companies to get information – data, on almost everything, which then enables to improve service, build up monopoly position, guide consumerist desire of users, *etc.* It is a business model where data is a key resource, and that makes it most adequate business models to digital age (*ibid.* 2017:48).

Different platforms have different ways of creating value, and accordingly, Srnicek broadly divides them in four categories: "advertising platform", "cloud platforms", "industrial platforms", "product platforms and lean platforms" (*ibid.* 2017:49). Because of scope of my field, I concentrate only on advertising platforms, because according to Srniček, Facebook (Instagram) and Google, belong to this category. Almost entire revenue of such platforms is based on advertising[54]. Thus, for these platforms to generate and maintain advertising income, data collection of users is fundamental to the way they generate revenue: they match up the advertisements with the consumeristic behavior based on the user data (*ibid.* 2017:53).

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[54] For Facebook 96,6%, and Google 89% (Srniček. 2017:53). As I mention in Ch. 1, Facebook owned platform Instagram, generates 30% of Facebook ad revenue comes from Instagram and following its growth trend, it is expected generate up to 70% by 2020.

In this process, users can be seen as unwaged laborers who produce content and data which is then collected and sold. Srnicek cautions that not every platform does this, and that not all of data users provide is commodified. Thus, Srnicek concentrates on a data as a raw material which is collected and analyzed, hence, the product for sale is not sum of users' personal activities, but aspect of matching advertisers with probable consumers (*ibid.* 2017:55-57).

Srniček suggests three possible outcomes for platform capitalism in the future: the most optimistic outcome outlines platforms organized in bottom-up manner and owned by public (*c.f.* Domingo 2015, and boyd 2011). Unfortunately, due to the network-effect and already established monopolies, Srnicek sees this option as highly improbable, and does not elaborate on. Second plausible option is a top-down, state-owned and regulated platform where main problem is highly unlikely to avoid security state[55], as the case of Chinese social credit score[56]. And most probable scenario based on current tendencies of expansion and monopolization of platforms is domination of massive corporate-like platforms (Srnicek 2017:126-129).

One of the seatbacks for this massive centralization of power by the platform giants is the issue of privacy. Recent example is last year's scandal with Cambridge Analytica and its connection with involvement with US elections and Brexit vote, and current US-Huawei "scandal". The issue is that regulations and laws have problems to catch up with the rapidity of platform development, whereas that most of regulations are based on Fordist and Post-Fordist businesses (*ibid.* 2017:126-129).

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[55] In the sense of IT security and surveillance, hence personal data, is "owned" by state.
[56] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7036259/China-says-social-credit-restore-morality-listing-millions-untrustworthy.html last accessed 5.06.2019

3.2 Data and the Human Capital

The more time one spends online, more data is harvested, which means that there is more profit to be made. Still, Srniček treat data as a raw material, and therefore, perceives it as neutral. He asserts that although there is a pressure to make people spend more time online, there are no means for "competitive pressure" in doing so (ibid. 2017:56). Although Srniček briefly mentions a type of profit which is based on data collection and surveillance, he does not delve into the confluence of the two. Shoshana Zuboff (2015), on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of this confluence. According to her, like Srniček's platform, Zuboff's "surveillance capitalism" functions in following way: collecting data begets more money which is then reinvested in to collect more data and make more profit. Yet, for Zuboff, data is far from neutral. She proposes that data is a core element in the new logic of capitalist accumulation, which is highly deliberated and of grave consequences. Data harvesting is not just a medium to match up the advertisements with the user behavior and by doing that modifying human behavior. It also accelerates the production of more platforms online in order to attract more users, and, hence, to profit even more. Zuboff emphasizes that data can be used for many purposes, but those purposes "do not erase its origins in an extractive project founded on formal indifference to the populations that comprise both its data sources and its ultimate targets" (*ibid.* 2015:75,76).

As platform capitalism with its unique form of commodifying personal data accelerated a financial advancement (Srnicek 2017), this has been followed by the increased techniques of locating and targeting specific personal data. The extraction and circulation of personal data became the central force of "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff 2015). Concomitantly, the commercial development of Internet along with the financial capitalism worked as a catalyst for corporations to marketize the data which users copiously shared on their online accounts.

However, as Wendy Brown argues, far from being only confined to corporations and market, the neoliberal reason "transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (Brown 2015:10). She locates the essence of the economic rationality in its focus on competition that renders individuals as "self-investing entrepreneurial capitals" (*ibid*. 2015:102) in which they craft themselves as assets that would maximize their positions in the market and attract investors (*ibid*. 2015:33).

In the case of followers of CGI Instagrammers, I would argue that the neoliberal logic ubiquitously pervades the digital platforms as it constructs prosumers' conduct with others. Perceiving self as an asset, the number of followers, curation of photos, received comments allow them to invest in their human capital. This allows Lil Miqueala and "her" creators to expand their prosumer base as well as to cling onto their position in Instagram. In particular, their production of narratives with the digital characters closely follows the comments and reviews of the prosumers. This, in turn, allows creators of Lil Miquela to invest in the specific types of advertisements which would later return them as economic resource to improve both the visual reality of Lil Miquela and the relevance of the narratives they produce.

In their statement, Brud, creators of Miquela, states that "story worlds that are the product of a collective intelligence informed by diverse individual experiences."[57] Hence, for them the narrative of Miquela is grounded on the collective interaction of followers and CGI Instagrammers, such as Miquela, and their endeavors acquire meaning if Brud utilizes the internet "to collectively teach our loved ones how to think critically and how to spot misinformation"[58]. In this sense, Brud acts as a market actor to whom business sets political goals. As society disintegrates into instantiations of human capital, the corporations

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[57] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1V5N5tcfm7wBuUshgrmIOz9ijAO-VRqvkUbGRu0uKdI8/edit last accessed on 6.06.2019
[58] *Ibid.*

incorporate the state and the political to "maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value […] to attract investors" (Brown 2015: 22).

These two aspects are relevant in the case of Lil Miquela as it attests to the "neoliberalization of every sphere of life" as Brown (2015) propounds. The stories based on the followers experiences and aspirations insurmountably expand the commercial potential of the CGI Instagrammers on advertising platforms. This is because CGI Instagrammers are completely customizable and much more cost-effective than their human counterparts. More importantly, their most of CGI Instagrammer' followers do not consider CGI Instagramers as commercial mediums, and even they are aware about it, they do not care, and still find it more interesting to dwell on Miquela's representation and her "story world".

Conclusion

Through discourse analysis of works by Harris, Mead, and Fortes, I delineate anthropological conceptualizations of self, other, and person, in a following way: self is site of experience which is developed as emergent response to "generalized other", and personhood is seen as actor whose agency is understood only in relationship to the others and needs to be publicly recognized. Additionally, I distinguish two types of personhood, personhood as a developmental path, and abstract personhood. I then contemplate these concepts in order to understand how people relate to themselves, each other and society at large.

Because seminal anthropological works on virtual sphere suggest that interaction online establishes new paradigm in understanding these concepts and the understanding between physical and virtual, I juxtapose their discourse of online meditation and interaction with more contemporary works of Robinson and Boellstorff, and come to conclusion that interaction online is based on the same principles which exist in nondigital setting. However, given that online self/other are indexical to the physical self/other, online is interpreted as yet another cultural context where one has to adopt a new set of skills in order to interpret what is "given" and "given off" by other(s) on online platforms.

I then employ this discourse supported with my empirical findings, which I have collected during my interviews with CGI followers and through observation of their interaction with CGI Instagrammers, in order to analyze the relationship between CGI Instagrammers and their followers, primarily Miquela and her fanbase.

I come to conclusion that Miquela can be envisioned as somebody having abstract personhood such as perennial one bestowed to Tallensi ancestral crocodile. However, discoursal status of Miquela's personhood is only deemed relevant when considered in regard to the developmental path of her followers. Out of that I suggest that CGI followers craft their own selfhood through inhabiting the generalized attitudes of CGI instagrammers.

Combining theories of Brown and Srnicek, which are explicating how neoliberalism, as a specific mode of rationality, pervades the digital through extraction of personal data, surveillance, and incentivization of self-investment, I argue that the digital space, as much as it opens a room for our negotiation of personhood, is still highly mediated by the mechanisms of platform capitalism.

Appendices

Table 1 – List of CGI Instagrammers with details

	Instagram name	Number of followers	Date of the first post	No. of posts	BIO	Link to IG profile https://www. instagram.com / + _____	Function / "profession"	~ Avg. no. of comments and likes
	Brud:							
1	lilmiquela	1,6mil	23.04.2016	491	19/LA/Robot, Black Lives Matter @innocenceproject |@lgbtlifecenter	@justiceforyouth	lilmiquela/	influencer /model /singer	Com:700 Likes: 200k
2	bermudaisbae	136k	13.08.2017	146	Bermuda - 🐰+😈Mogul. Robot. Friend. In that order.	bermudaisbae/	influencer /model /"mogul"	Com: 300 Likes: 10k
3	blawko22	135k	27.11.2017	230	Yong Robot Tryna Get It// I care about shit/ new video on YT every Wednesday	blawko/	influencer /vlogger	Com: 200 Likes: 9k
	The Digitals:							
4	shudu.gram	176k	22.4.2017	60	The World's First Digital Supermodel www.thediigitals.com/ muse	shudu.gram/	1st digital supermodel /model	Com: 250 Likes: 15k
5	brenn.gram	2,1k	8.7.2018	11	Digital Supermodel thediigitals.com/brenn	brenn.gram/	digital supermodel	Com:12 Likes:600
6	galaxia.gram	1k	3.7.2018	3	Galaxia - The World's First Alien Supermodel	galaxia.gram/	1st alien digital supermodel	Com: 20 Likes: 50
7	koffi.gram	7,6k	1.1.2019	6	Virtual Influencer/model	koffi.gram/	model /influencer	Com:50, Likes: 2,7k
8	dagny.gram	3,081k	20.3.2019	5	Dagny - Digital Superhuman www.thediigitals.com	dagny.gram/	1st digital superhuman/m odel	Com: 10 Likes: 200
	Popular in Japan:							
9	imma.gram	65,3k	12.7.2018	52	I'm a virtual girl. I'm interested in Japanese culture and film.	imma.gram/	influencer	Com: 20 Likes: 4k
10	aoiprism	5k	20.2.2019	33	あおぷりだよ😝 (it means: its good GT) "Virtual Gal" based on Neotokyo	aoiprism/	influencer /model	Com: 10 Likes: 300
11	liam_nikuro	8k	27.3.2019	18	US×JP/Virtual Human/CGI /Robot I'm Liam, virtual human created using CG	liam_nikuro/	influencer/ model/ singer	Com: 30 Likes: 400

	Popular among teens							
12	cadeharper	99k	20.07.2018	130	15/here to make difference 🌏 be kind, be positive 🤍	cadeharper/	influencer (positivity)	Com: 300 Likes:10k
13	pippapei	9k	06.02.2019	32	Be kind to others and enjoy your life – it's the only one you have!	pippapei/	influencer (positivity)	Com: 80 Likes: 1k
	Internet "natives"							
14	perl.www	12.2k	30.04.2018	47	Born and raised in the internet	perl.www/	Influencer/ model	Com:25 Likes: 2,6k
15	karina.robo	77	2/25/2019	16	🐚Karina🐚 Digital Supermodel SaveForest 🌱🌍	karina.robo/	Digital supermodel	Com:3 Likes:3
16	os.dion	544	18.01.2018	137	Dion -you're meant to be here	os.dion/	Robot/ climate change activist/ artist	Com: 3 Likes: 70
17	iam.3d	900	15.01.2019	29	Virtual Model	iam.3d/	model	Com: 4 Likes: 200
18	dearnea	1,7k	12.8.2018	27	N E A | 3D MODEL | fashion/techwear/fitnes swear🧥 📍germany/cologneDE ▢creating own 3D garment▢	neaapparel/	Virtual influencer/ model	Com: 11 Likes: 500
	"Erotic" CGI							
19	baddiecandie	5,5k	10.01.2019	30	BADDIE CANDIE - You're typical 23 year old Melbourne gal AU▢ 🖤	baddiecandie/	model-influencer	Com: 50 Likes: 550
20	thereal.veronica	118	05.01.2019	8	Veronica Thinking too much …	thereal.veronica/	virtual model	Com: 4 Likes: 50
21	iam.lena.official	200	03.11.2018	82	Lena -21-Life's a party -⊘🧴🪄🔮🎮🎸	iam.lena.official/	virtual model	Com: 6 Likes: 60
22	Bootlegbarry	540	23.11.2018	17	BARRY -23 London, UK Model 📸 / Robot	bootlegbarry/	influencer/ virtual model	Com: 10 Likes: 100
23	avadiva.gram	284	26.09.2018	30	Ava Diva - 18/NY/ International v-Model	avadiva.gram/	virtual model	Com: 3 Likes: 160
24	milamilo.gram	1,2k	28.02.2019	29	Mila Milo -23 y.o. virtual girl. Singer. Traveler.	milamilo.gram /	influencer/ model	Com: 2 Likes 120
25	idalia.visual	1,6k	13.02.2109	6	Idalia | Virtual Influencer Modeling/Fashion/Life style	idalia.visual/? hl=en	model	Com: 30 Likes: 600
26	jedyvales	18,3k	06.05.2019	22	Jedy Vales, it's pronounced 'jedie'	jedyvales/	porn star	Com: 20 Likes: 900

					i work @ YouPorn			
	Others:							
27	hey_mrs.stone	2,1k	20.11.2018	23	Hannah Stein. I'm a virtual model... ...and yes, I really did wake up like this 😉	hey_mrs.stone /	virtual model	Com: 9 Likes 100
28	eda.dama	3k	24.11.2018	96	Eda Dama |The first Italian ɪᴛ Digital Model Write me for collaborations ✉	eda.dama/	virtual model	Com: 10 Likes: 150
29	ryle.exe	1,6k	26.11.2018	20	𝓡𝔂 18 LA Mdel Thotbot - dm for collabs	rylie.exe/	virtual model	Com: 22 Likes: 200
30	ivaany.h	7,7k	12.03.2019	6	Ivany FR	ivaany.h/	virtual model / CGI influencer	Com: 5 Likes: 150
31	stasizzle	312	19.10.2018	7	Anastasia|19|AI	stasizzle/	influencer	Com: 3 Likes: 50
32	tianajio	210	20.08.2018	10	Tiana Fujio - A lady with ports and plastic hair	tianajio/	architecture graduate/ robot	Com: 2 Likes: 60
33	iamloganfin	1,2k	02.05.2019	19	Logan Here to make a difference 🌍 Be kind to others and enjoy life |Positive Vibes Only|	iamloganfin/	influencer/ virtual model	Com: 5 Likes: 60
34	chasing.laila	800	28.09.2018	17	Laila Blue 🤍ᴀᴇ - 🤟 Just me, myself and CGI - 📨	chasing.laila/	1st Middle East virtual influencer	Com: 9 Likes: 90
35	abawils	354	28.01.2018	13	MISS ABA WILSEN Ghana's 1st Virtual Influencer Loves Fashion, Music, Dancing, Acting, traveling. Your Coolest Pal.. 23	abawils/	Ghana's 1st virtual influencer/ model	Com: 3 Likes: 200
36	hiiromy.h	69	05.05.2019	3	Hiromy 1/3 h.doll Virtual human Influencer	hiiromy.h/	influencer	Com: 5 Likes: 44
	Disqualified:							
37	KFC (aka Colonel Harland Sanders)	1,3mil	Part of	KFC	Instagram	page.		
38	noonnoori	270k	Mascot.					
39	rubiglom	75k	Biological	human	with	extreme	amount of	photoshop.
40	irmazmodels	1,3k	Virtual	model	"agency".			
41	geeyangelo	900	Simsta-gramer	Instagram	for	Sims	Online	
42	blankocrown	200	Same	as	above			

43	perpetuagrant	600	Same	as	above			
44	yungricopablo	300	Same	as	above			

Table 2 – List of interlocutors

	Date of the interview	Provided name	Age
	Fans		
1	3-5.04.2019	Savannah	20
2	06.04.2019	Sheridan	20
3	9-11.04.2019	Hana	50
4	05.04.2019	Victoria	20
5	05.04.2019	Lucas	21
6	9-11.04.2019	Maria	20
7	09.04.2019	Salim	25
8	09.04.2019	Anastacia	18
9	10-12.04.2019	Jasna	26
10	16-17.05.2019	Youssef	18
11	17-18.05.2019	Taylor	24
12	11.04.2019	Matty	23
	"Rational"		
13	04.05.2019	Enzo	27
14	12.04.2019	Imani	18
15	15.05.2019	Mollie	19
16	15.05.2019	Mera	27
	"Haters"		
17	11.04.2019	Mark	18
18	01.05.2019	unknown	unknown

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